

Bush in Baghdad

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President Bush's trip to Baghdad Tuesday has been hailed by the American media and official Washington as something of a political masterstroke. In fact, the sudden trip, conducted in secrecy even from the Iraqi government that holds nominal sovereignty in the US-occupied country, was a demonstration of both the dire state of affairs in Iraq and the political isolation and disorientation of the Bush administration.

No amount of "spin" can alter the sense of something degrading and even ludicrous in the spectacle of an American president stealing into a foreign capital, spending five hours on the ground in a series of stage-managed and largely meaningless public appearances, and then flying off under cover of darkness, never having left the safety of the fortified Green Zone in downtown Baghdad.

The most remarkable fact of the visit was that the Iraqi prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, was informed of Bush's presence in his country only five minutes before he was ushered in to meet the US president. Until then, Maliki had been led to believe he was going to the US embassy to participate in a videoconference with Bush and his war cabinet, ensconced in the presidential retreat at Camp David, Maryland.

Maliki's ignorance of Bush's arrival demonstrates that the government installed in Baghdad by the American invaders lacks one of the most essential attributes of sovereignty: it has no control over who comes into the country.

If Bush had swooped down on any other capital city in that fashion—with the possible exception of Kabul, headquarters of another US stooge regime—his plane or helicopter would have been intercepted or even shot down. But Iraq is not an independent country. It is a conquered province of the US empire.

The Iraqi "government" does not govern, even in Baghdad. It is simply an agency of the real government, the American occupation regime headed by US

Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and enforced by 130,000 US troops.

The US media did not raise this issue in its initial coverage of the Bush trip, instead parroting the claim that the Iraqi government was kept in the dark for "security reasons." No one would expect that the presidential flight plan be posted on the Internet, but the failure to inform anyone in the Iraqi government, even at the highest level, has only two possible explanations, neither of them very flattering to the pretensions of the Bush administration.

Either the Iraqi government is so riddled with enemies of the US occupation that to inform Prime Minister Maliki, President Jalal Talabani and their closest aides that Bush was coming would have created a security danger. Or the Bush administration is so indifferent to world and Iraqi public opinion that it simply can't be bothered to sustain the fiction that the government in Baghdad exercises any real authority.

The second thesis would also explain the discontented scowl on Prime Minister Maliki's face throughout his appearance with Bush. He seemed uncomfortably aware that the US president was treating him like a guest in his own country—an impression underscored when the president leaned over to him and said: "I appreciate you recognizing that the future of the country is in your hands." Actually, neither the future nor the present is in Maliki's hands, as Bush's sudden appearance demonstrated.

The timing of Bush's visit was ostensibly determined by the swearing-in of Maliki's cabinet after its approval by the Iraqi parliament. That followed seven months of political wrangling between rival religious and ethnic-based factions, Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish, over control of various state positions, particularly the three key security positions. Bush hailed the cabinet line-up as "very impressive," although it must be doubted whether the US president could actually

identify a single member besides Maliki.

The real purpose of the trip had more to do with American than Iraqi politics. Bush sought to cash in on the wave of publicity surrounding the killing of Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi, the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, and give a boost both to his crumbling political support and to the congressional Republicans, who face losing control of at least the House of Representatives and possibly the Senate in the November elections.

Bush and his top political aides do not seek to reverse their plunging poll numbers by making any concessions to the growth of anti-war opinion. Rather, they hope to rally their ultra-right base by using the Zarqawi killing to give credibility to new promises of military victory in Iraq.

To that end, Bush gave his full support to the military operation which the Maliki government is to launch Wednesday, mobilizing 75,000 Iraqi troops, backed by US “advisers” and warplanes, to flood the streets of Baghdad, establish hundreds of new check points and conduct house-to-house searches in many neighborhoods suspected of supporting the anti-US resistance.

Public relations exercises and a show of force will not, however, alter the fundamental reality of the war in Iraq: the US military occupation is bitterly opposed, not only by the vast majority of Iraqis, but by a growing majority of the American people. On the eve of Bush’s trip, a new AP-Ipsos poll of public opinion in the United States found that support for Bush’s handling of the war in Iraq has fallen to 33 percent, a new low, and that his overall job approval rating was only 35 percent, the lowest for any American president since Richard Nixon was forced to resign in the Watergate scandal.

The Bush administration is sustained politically, not by popular backing for the war or for its right-wing domestic agenda, but by the prostration of the Democratic Party, the only other major reservoir of support for the US occupation of Iraq. Typical was the reaction of a leading Senate Democrat, Carl Levin of Michigan, to Bush’s visit to Baghdad. The senior Democrat on the Armed Services Committee hailed the trip as “likely to lead to phased redeployments this year and continuing in the next year.”

Actually, as one network television correspondent pointed out, there are 8,000 more US troops in Iraq than the last time Bush visited—his Thanksgiving Day

photo-op in 2003, where he was shown serving a turkey to troops at the Baghdad International Airport. (The turkey was later revealed to be a plastic prop.)

There is the same element of bizarre, almost childish pretense in the latest public relations stunt. Why, moreover, should the security precautions include keeping the CIA director, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and much of the White House staff in the dark? Was there a danger of Al Qaeda infiltration there too? Why the fighter jet patrols over the green zone? The insurgency does not possess an air force.

The cloak-and-dagger dramatics and the heavy-handed security precautions suggest an element of cowardice in the face of the dangers which tens of thousands of ordinary US soldiers face every day, as well as the vast majority of the Iraqi people. This is a character trait often found in those who, like Bush, enjoy playing the bully.

Let us not forget that this same president—who as a young man used his family connections to avoid serving in Vietnam—famously told Iraqi insurgents to “bring it on.” His defense secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, dismissed the concerns of rank-and-file soldiers about the poor-quality armor on their vehicles, telling them, “You go to war with the Army that you have.”

Now, after close to 2,500 American deaths and well over 100,000 Iraqi deaths, the US commander-in-chief steals in and out of Baghdad like a thief.



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